

SHORT.DOC

The government isn't going to be able to hang a habitat rap on this part of the shortgrass country. We are taking better care of the wild animals than Snow White ever sheltered her dwarves.

Last week, three eagles drawn by a flock of ewes on the feed ground landed within 50 feet of the pickup as gently as a covey of house quail. Thirty minutes later, the ol' boy reading the electric coop's meters hailed me down to report he'd just seen three bobcats off the public road in broad daylight. In the afternoon, two more eagles all but ignored us riding horseback over their hunting grounds.

Out here we provide complimentary shelter for a large range of different species besides the sharp-taloned creatures. A ladder back woodpecker works nonstop, the year round, on the ranch buildings. He no more than finishes drilling out a hole until a family of fox squirrels moves in and starts storing what pecans the raccoons and the deer overlook.

In December, an armadillo began digging up the pole bracing the telephone line in the backyard. Armadillos in a dry grass country use creosote oils on treated poles as a shell polisher. Hard to imagine a prehistoric animal being vain about the sheen of his armor, but a lot goes on in nature that we fail to catch.

Town folks stick cute bumper stickers on their vans proclaiming that they stop for armadillo crossings. However, the uprooting of a brace pole holding seven miles of telephone wire taut tends to change your position on the subject of bumper stickers and animal crossings.

This particular armadillo excavates about three to four inches of hole a night. I tried pouring goose grease and turkey fats left over from the holidays down the side of the pole, hoping he would utilize a different lubricant. But once he struck the different pay, he began to throw dirt to the side like a coyote making a major slide under a netwire fence.

Keeping such a high habitat rating is tedious. Non-lethal cannons are available from the federal people to scare off eagles, but no guidance is available on what a fake artillery barrage will do to armadillos and squirrels and woodpeckers.

A five or six-man crew ought to be able to shoot enough cannons to make the eagles back off this small of an outfit. I haven't fired any blanks since way back in the Thirties, when Sears Roebuck put out a bunch of cheap shotshells that would barely make a whooshing sound, so I really can't say how much firepower it'll take to protect a spring lamb or goat crop.

Shortgrass people are law-abiding by nature. We aren't inclined to violate federal or state laws protecting predatory animals. Also, after reviewing the energy levels

and attention spans of the lawyers in San Angelo, who mainly specialize in civil law, I can see good reason to stay out of trouble.

Lawbreakers have to have the support of practiced defenders. Unless the lawless are willing to throw themselves on the mercy of the court, they don't want to rob and steal where the lawyers think a bad call by the referees in a Cowboy's game is the ultimate of capital offenses.

I ate lunch over there last week with an old friend who runs an accounting office. Every lawyer passing the table stopped and gave him a big hello. The attention passed unexplained, but I figured a juicy probate and inheritance tax deal must be up on the board, looking for an attorney to settle an estate. But it might have been the organizing of the week's football pool, or a handicap on the Super Bowl that was stimulating the activity.

The more this matter comes to light, the easier it is to see why San Angelo has never been appealing to organized crime. I am terrified of the federal codes, but I also don't want to think about being headed for the scaffolds and learn my lawyer is catching the fourth quarter in the Dallas game, or off settling a suit involving a big oil field.

I am sure in favor of the game and fish people furnishing cannons to return the eagles to the wild state. Any day, a flight might land in the front yard and wipe out my squirrels and woodpeckers. No need, however, to worry

about them killing the armadillo. His shell is too slick for  
an eagle to grab.